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Developing an Online Interactive Guide for Law Students

This article by Jenni Crossley and Claire Tylee examines the process of developing an online interactive guide for law students by librarians at the University of the West of England. The guide was based on material contained in the professional studies printed resource book and various multimedia applications were included to enhance the learning experience for students.

Introduction

This article expands upon a presentation given at the joint UKCLE/BIALL seminar on teaching and learning for legal skills trainers at University College London in February 2005. The Law Faculty at the University of the West of England (UWE) has expanded rapidly in recent years, and currently has approximately one thousand students enrolled on undergraduate, postgraduate and professional studies courses. To enhance the legal information literacy skills of law students and non-specialist library staff, the Law Librarians (Julie Hamley and Fiona Youngman) embarked in 2003 upon a project to create an interactive online guide.

Why an online guide?

The decision to develop an online guide stemmed from three major factors:-

- The high priority given to practical legal research within the curriculum
 - Growing student numbers
 - The expansion of distance and open learning modules
- These changes can be traced back to 1993, with the restructuring of solicitors' training and the arrival of the Legal Practice Course. Unlike its predecessor it was, and still is, skills based, practical and run through a series of workshops.

Practical Legal Research (PLR) being identified as a core skill meant that successful information retrieval was

high on the agenda, and the law librarian was considered best placed to teach it. By 1999, the law library team (consisting of one full-time faculty librarian and an assistant librarian shared with another faculty) were averaging fifteen hours a week of face-to-face teaching plus an enormous enquiry load. Whilst this ensured a high profile for the law library team, this situation was not sustainable as other aspects of the job were suffering. Developing a more flexible approach towards legal information skills teaching was also a necessity to cater for the needs of open, distance and full-time learners, many of whom combine studying with other commitments.

A further concern was that it takes practice to become a good legal researcher. This is best done at the student's own pace after his initial library induction, and the provision of online tutorials lends itself well to this approach.

Content of the guide

A decision was made in the early stages of the project to produce an online interactive guide which could exist as a separate entity from the University's virtual learning environment (VLE) rather than embedding it within this software. At the inception of the project, the Law Faculty was not a heavy user of Blackboard (branded as UWE Online by the University). Furthermore, it was felt to be more accessible through the Law Library subject web pages, especially to new students. We did, however, make sure that links to the guide were included in the appropriate places within the VLE.

The online interactive guide was based upon material included in the professional studies resource book, a document which contains information on print and electronic sources, usernames and passwords, practice questions, floorplans and general library information. Whilst the resource book went some way to supporting students, and is indeed still produced, it was not felt to be sufficient. In particular, the material is very one-dimensional and non-interactive. It does not appeal to a variety of learning style preferences and is not the best medium to illustrate how to use printed and electronic law resources. Furthermore, the resource book is expensive to produce, is easily lost, and replacements are only issued at cost to the student. So, the basic structure of the guide was determined by material in the print resource book, to which we have added and continue to add a number of enhancements.

Audio-enabled database demonstrations

The first of these are audio-enabled database demonstrations. Our decision about what to cover in these was driven by the more complex queries that were coming to us. It was clearly not obvious to the students how they should proceed with such queries using the relevant databases despite the provision of print guides and online help.

Producing these database demonstrations involved seeking permission from suppliers to cache database screen shots into PowerPoint. These were given to Jane Redman, an assistant librarian specialising in e-learning support, with the text of the demonstration which she added using sound and text boxes. We also added Informs tutorials to the guide. These enable a user to follow a set of instructions whilst logged into a live database, and thereby carry out a real, if controlled, search.

Video

We included in the guide two videos which were produced by the University of Sheffield and which we regularly use in our teaching. To make things more relevant they were divided up so that they are embedded at the appropriate points in the guide.

We worked on five other videos of our own to cover areas which were not dealt with in sufficient detail by the Sheffield tapes or where we needed to adopt a local focus to meet our students' needs.

Interactive quizzes

One of the key features that we wanted to include was the ability for students to check their understanding and progress. To that end, we included a number of interactive quizzes. These are multiple choice and provide instant feedback to students, so they know if they have the right answer, their overall percentage score for each quiz and so on. We also included information in the quizzes that explains why an answer is right, rather than just giving a right or wrong answer.

Interactive floor plans

We felt that enhanced plans of key areas of the library would assist better navigation around the print collection in particular, so Jane developed a series of interactive floor plans. The user can click on links incorporated into these plans. He is taken to the appropriate point in the guide, or the library web pages, for more information on his chosen resource.

The media detailed above provides support in a range of formats thereby increasing the likelihood of students finding a delivery method which suits their learning styles. For instance, the audio and text enabled animated database demonstrations show the students how to perform database searches by making them watch and listen, while including interactive database tutorials allows students to learn through the experience of carrying out a real search.

Use in teaching

The guide was not created to replace face-to-face sessions with the law librarians (although it provided a

useful alternative for those unable to attend). Rather, it was designed to supplement these sessions and to provide accessible help at point of need. The guide has been made available as a learning support resource for students on all of the law courses offered by UWE. However, the focus of the integration into teaching so far has been on the LPC and the BVC courses.

The interactive guide was introduced to LPC students, both full and part time, during their first PLR session in September 2004. They were given two tasks to complete between their PLR workshops: an interactive database tutorial on using Halsbury's Direct and a number of online quizzes intended to test their understanding of basic legal research. The quiz element was based around a task previously included in the printed resource book and it was accessible to LPC students for a limited time period. Students were asked to log in to each element of the quiz, complete it and then click on a button to indicate that they had finished. The software (Hot Potatoes) then generated a score and sent it to the law librarians' generic e-mail account. The law librarians were able to see which students had completed the task and how successful they had been. This information was fed back to the tutors teaching PLR.

For the BVC students, we concentrated upon introducing them to the Kemp and Kemp personal injury and quantum damages database, which they need to get to grips with very early in the course. We created three audio and text-enabled PowerPoint demonstrations and a number of quizzes relating to the database and introduced students to these during their timetabled library induction sessions. Part of each session was then given over to self-paced study of this database while the law librarians were on hand to offer advice. The expectation that they would continue to explore this and other elements of the guide in their own time was stressed to the students.

Feedback

Getting feedback from student users of the guide has proved extremely difficult, not least because most students prefer to use their personal e-mail accounts, for which we don't have the details, rather than their university ones. The limited feedback we have received indicates a preference for a combination of printed and web based learning materials, rather than a reliance upon one format. The database guides and tutorials and the quizzes were considered particularly successful aspects, and this has encouraged us to continue to develop them. When the interactive guide is used to help students with their enquiries, they normally express enthusiasm for it but no evidence exists to show students refer to the guide themselves regularly.

One of the authors found the guide an extremely useful resource to complement her induction programme. Without any prior legal experience, she had to build up a reasonable knowledge of law and legal resources quickly, to enable her to start teaching sessions within two weeks of being in post! The non-linear approach of the guide enabled her to dip in and out of the material when needed which made it a very relevant and efficient tool. This structure also enables library staff to recommend precise sections of the guide to students to help answer their queries.

The guide has also been used to help train librarians respond to law-related queries encountered at the enquiry desk. Whilst these staff believed the content and navigability of the guide was good, it was felt that there was room for improvement. For example, the quizzes would be more effective if they were dispersed around the guide, helping to reinforce learning from the information provided. It was also pointed out that more feedback on incorrect responses to quiz questions would be helpful, in addition to an explanation of why a response was right. Technical problems have also been encountered by some users when the guide is accessed from non-multimedia or 'thin-client' computers, particularly relating to the video clips.

Seminar in London

When the interactive guide was demonstrated at the well-attended event for legal skills trainers at UCL in February 2005, aspects of particular interest to the conference delegates included the audio-enabled database demonstrations, the video clips and the quizzes. All three of these components were created by the law librarians and Jane Redman in-house, so the favourable response was particularly gratifying.

A number of delegates took the opportunity to explore the guide when they returned to their libraries. Feedback from this trial access has been largely positive, many respondents remarking on the ambitious scope of its coverage. Other favourable comments were that the 'bite-sized' information met the students' needs well and provided a useful revision tool and the film clips were successful as they added an extra visual dimension to the content. Another delegate, who has experience of developing online support material, commented on the innovative use of the various media to encourage interactivity. Interestingly, she picked up on the fact that the interactive guide had been created from a printed resource book and as a result, some of the sections were rather wordy.

Conclusion

The interactive guide is still very much a work in progress. The law librarians are currently seeking

evaluations of the guide from different user groups and academic colleagues to enable improvements to be made and less successful material to be dropped. Early indications suggest, however, that the guide's success as a learning support tool hinges upon its integration into the student learning experience. We would like to see future quizzes included as course-work made compulsory and linked to formal assessment.

Technical considerations

80 GB 2.5 GHz multimedia computer
Hot Potatoes or similar quiz software
Dreamweaver 4
Camcorder
Digital camera
Tripod

Biographies

Jenni Crossley has worked at UWE since 2000, and as one half of the Law Faculty Librarian job-share since September 2003. Prior to that she has worked at Imperial College in the physics library, and as a school librarian.

Claire Tylee is currently employed as Law Faculty Librarian at UWE, covering a period of maternity leave. She also works at the University of Bath as a Management Librarian. Prior to that she has worked at the Art and Design Campus Library at Bath Spa University College and in the public library sector.

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